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DEALING WITH IRAN SAID TO UNDERCUT CREDIBILITY OF U.S.

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WASHINGTON, Nov. 8 — Administration officials said today that the reports about Washington's secret involvement in arms shipments to Iran had caused serious credibility problems for the United States with key countries around the world.

The affair has also put deep strains on Secretary of State George P. Shultz's relations with the White House because, Administration officials say, the State Department had opposed the covert mission and had been deliberately denied information about it.

Tensions within the Administration were running high today, and aides to Mr. Shultz said the affair could lead to his resignation. The aides also confirmed that he had been told not to discuss the Iran operation publicly.

'What Our Policy Is'

Administration officials said Friday that contacts with Iran had been approved by President Reagan and were intended to end Teheran's support for terrorism and win release of American hostages held in Lebanon by a group believed to have ties to Iran. The original decision did not cover arms sales to Iran but these were agreed to later, using Israeli middlemen to help win the release of three hostages.

"The Arabs and everyone else are demanding to know what our policy is on dealing with terrorists and on sending arms to Iran, and we haven't been able to tell them anything since all this hit the fan," a top State Department official said. "We've been so holier-than-thou on not giving in to terrorists and on not aiding Iran's war effort that we're going to have a tough time for a while explaining what happened."

Mr. Shultz finds his standing particularly undercut, State Department officials said, because he had assured a meeting of Arab foreign ministers on Oct. 1 that the United States was doing everything it could to halt the shipment of arms to Iran.

"If the Secretary is going to resign

over something, this would be it," one aide said. "There is no issue he cares about more than counterterrorism, and the disclosures would seem to make a mockery of everything Shultz stands for."

But he said he did not know what Mr. Shultz intended to do.

Mr. Shultz has made cryptic comments in recent days about the contacts with Iran over an 18-month period, affirming his opposition to dealing with terrorists for the release of hostages and saying the White House had told him not to say anything about the operation.

The White House, in turn, denied on Friday that it had instructed Mr. Shultz to remain silent. Today, however, a State Department official countered by saying the White House had sent written instructions limiting all comment on the subject to the White House.

Shipment of U.S. Arms

It now appears that at the same time Mr. Shultz was assuring the Arabs about the American policy of trying to keep arms from Iran, American agents had worked out a deal to send American arms to Iran on a Danish ship by way of an Israeli middleman. That deal is presumed to have led to the release last week of David P. Jacobsen, one of the American hostages in Lebanon.

The secret dealings with Iran also caused problems for the Secretary of Defense, Caspar W. Weinberger. On his recent trip around the world, he had raised the issue of the Persian Gulf war in his discussion with Chinese leaders in Peking, urging them to stop sending arms to Iran. "I wonder what the Chinese think now," a Pentagon aide said. "I don't know what to think myself."

This raises questions about what Mr. Shultz and Mr. Weinberger knew or did not know and whether they were deliberately misstating American policy or did not know Iran was getting arms.

State Department officials said Mr. Shultz and Mr. Weinberger urged President Reagan early this year to close a secret channel to Iran that was opened in July 1985 by Robert C. McFarlane, who was Mr. Reagan's national security adviser until December 1985.

That channel, which had been opened at the suggestion of some Israeli businessmen with experience in Iran, had led to the secret shipment of American arms and spare parts to Iran, in exchange for which Teheran was to use its influence to win the release of American hostages held by a pro-Iranian group in Lebanon.

Minister Freed in Lebanon

In July 1985 the Rev. Benjamin Weir, a Presbyterian minister, was released, and the White House interpreted this as directly attributable to the arms shipment to Iran through the Israelis.

According to an Israeli reporter, Shimon Shiffer, Mr. Reagan telephoned Prime Minister Shimon Peres after Mr. Weir's release to thank Israel profusely for its help.

According to Administration officials, Mr. Shultz had argued that for the United States to be paying ransom, in effect, to Iran contradicted the American antiterrorism policy and undermined Washington's credibility in the Middle East and elsewhere.

Mr. Reagan agreed with the recommendation of Mr. Shultz and Mr. Weinberger and ordered the operation halted, the officials said.

In fact, on May 6 of this year, the United States issued a policy statement on terrorism that said, in part: "The United States Government will make no concessions to terrorists. It will not pay ransoms, release prisoners, change its policies or agree to other acts that might encourage additional terrorism."

According to Administration officials, Mr. Reagan was prevailed upon last June to change his mind by Vice Adm. John M. Poindexter, who replaced Mr. McFarlane as the director of the National Security Council staff. Under a highly secret program, known only to the White House initially, arms shipments to Iran resumed in July. That led to the release that month of the Rev. Lawrence M. Jenco, a Roman Catholic priest, the officials said.

The State Department was not officially informed of the resumption of the channel to Iran, but a few aides found out about it informally, department officials said.

One aide said Mr. Shultz was urged by one or two top advisers to register a very strong objection with the President about the operation, which was being handled through unorthodox channels.

It was not a regular covert operation, for which the Central Intelligence

Agency has prime responsibility, and for which it has to consult with State and Defense Department liaison officials and inform intelligence committees in Congress. Rather, it was being directed by the National Security Council staff, and the staff had instructions not to inform anyone else about it, officials said.

It is highly unusual for an operation with such implications for American foreign policy to be run without discussion by the National Security Council, of which the Secretaries of State and Defense are statutory members.

When informed that the department had learned that the arms shipments and contacts with Iran were continuing, officials said, Mr. Shultz did not make an issue out of it. He was kept in the dark on what the White House staff,

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led by Lieut Col. Oliver L. North, the deputy director of political-military affairs in the National Security Council staff, was doing with the Iranians.

It is unclear why Mr. Shultz was so passive about the operation, but one official said that he took the position that since the President knew his position and had overruled him, there was little to be done. Several officials said Mr. Shultz not only was kept uninformed of what was happening but wanted to distance himself as much as possible from the operation.

Neither Mr. Shultz nor Mr. Weinberger, according to their aides, knew that Mr. McFarlane was going to Iran in September to deal with the Iranians, or that another arms shipment was authorized that month.